



**CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY**  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

**OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR**

9 April 1970

**MEMORANDUM FOR:** The Honorable Melvin R. Laird  
The Secretary of Defense

**SUBJECT** : Agency Comments on JCS Vietnam  
Planning Paper

Per your request, I asked a very small group of my knowledgeable associates to review those portions of the JCS Vietnam planning paper that were appended to your memorandum of 13 March. Their comments are attached hereto. I am forwarding these comments only to you for your private information and use.

*As* / Richard Helms

Richard Helms  
Director

Attachment

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Comments on "Current Situation" Appendix to  
RVNAF Improvement and Modernization Plan

1. That portion of Part II of the Appendix to the plan for the consolidation phase of RVNAF Improvement and Modernization entitled, "CURRENT SITUATION" (pages 3-18) was apparently drafted in November 1969. It is performe now somewhat outdated, but events of the past few months have not substantially altered the elements involved in many of the subjects there considered. The JCS paper generally reflects the intelligence community's overall assessment of the situation as of the end of 1969. It did, in retrospect, somewhat overweight the chances of the enemy's significantly stepping up military activity in early 1970. The JCS paper is both cautious and candid in its comments about soft spots in pacification, the need for consolidation and improvement in the GVN's rural security apparatus, and the leadership talent problem that inhibits both current RVNAF performance and future force increases. We concur in these comments but feel that in spite of such frankly stated caveats, the overall tone of the JCS appendix may suggest more grounds for optimism about the prospects for further pacification progress than the available evidence warrants or, for that matter, than the drafters of the appendix may have intended to convey.

2. On points of detail, we offer the following specific comments for consideration. These comments are keyed to individual paragraphs of the JCS appendix:

Para 3. This Agency has not yet developed an end-of-year estimate of the strength of enemy forces. On the basis of the work done to date, however, a net decline of approximately 50,000 men seems to be of the right order of magnitude.

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Para. 4. We would not have interpreted the current rates of infiltration to be adequate to support a judgment, "...that the enemy is attempting to maintain his strength, possibly for major offensive activity early in 1970." Infiltration so far this year has been less than adequate to maintain enemy force levels. The time lag between departures and arrivals would prevent the enemy from significantly improving his capabilities to support a major offensive before the second half of 1970.

We also note that some of the unit deployments cited as evidence of stepping up offensive activity are open to other interpretations. Captured documents, for example, strongly suggest that the NVA units deployed to the delta are to be used in small-unit operations in tactics designed to avoid casualties.

Para 6. We share the judgments expressed in this paragraph on the difficulties involved in projecting enemy strength estimates over the next 2-3 years. The present trends in declining force levels can be reversed, however, without increasing infiltration. Enemy losses are to a considerable extent a function of enemy activity and the rate is, hence, susceptible to a considerable measure of enemy control. By varying his tactics the enemy can sharply curtail his losses, thus maintaining or building up force levels without necessarily increasing infiltration above the 1969 level.

Para 7. We are unable to identify the source of the estimates of enemy strength given in this table, and do not believe there is yet sufficient data available to make reliable end of the year estimates. The estimates given in Table 4 show substantial differences from the most recent agreed CIA/DIA estimates. The NVA combat force estimate, for example, does not include an estimated 10-15,000 troops carried in the CIA/DIA agreed figures as part of the out-of-country threat. Even when this adjustment is taken into account, the NVA force figures seem to be on the high side. The Administrative Services estimates are consistent with agreed CIA/DIA estimates. The Guerrilla estimate is conservative and somewhat below the most recently agreed CIA/DIA estimates (end-September 1969). Finally, we would note that the constant lack of current data and the deficiencies in the data which are

available, have always constrained the CIA/DIA agreed estimate to show a range of 50-60,000 in total strength in order to avoid an erroneous impression of high precision regarding these numbers.

Para 8. This and paragraph 9 convey a tone of optimism regarding the friendly situation which we are unable to share fully. The text gives the appearance of basing rather broad generalizations on one or two specific facts. We feel, for example, that much of the shifting of the burden of the war to the Government of Vietnam would have occurred whether or not there had been growth in the "size and ability" of GVN forces. Even more important is the fact that, for the most part, the enemy's efforts to minimize his losses probably accounts for the reduced scale of combat over the past year. This in turn has reduced the extent of GVN combat participation so that the GVN military establishment has not had to face the acid test of major combat on a really broad scale.

Para 8.a. The comments on pacification strike us as somewhat over-optimistic. Some of the gains in pacification seem to be the result of an enemy decision not to contest the program too vigorously while US forces are being withdrawn. In addition, studies and field surveys by Washington analysts show that many of 1969's pacification gains are quite fragile and can probably be reversed when the enemy chooses to contest them seriously. These same studies note that the Viet Cong infrastructure remains relatively intact and still has a considerable capacity for disrupting pacification by covert/subversive programs. Finally, we note few signs of really positive political cohesion or political allegiance to the GVN in rural areas. Thieu has assiduously cultivated village and hamlet officials, but this has not perceptibly increased a sense of identification with him or his government among the rural population. Furthermore, though many people in rural areas are living better than ever before, the GVN is not yet receiving widespread political credit for improved conditions.

Para 8.b.(1). The use of these engagements as examples of the general growth of capability is somewhat misleading. Many view these battles as standoffs resulting from the heavy employment of US airpower. Moreover, to use the Ben Het example, ARVN's "increased confidence and combat capability" should be viewed against the desertion background. Prior to May 1969, ARVN's 42nd Regiment (the unit which bore the brunt of the enemy's attack) had a desertion rate of about 20 men per thousand. During June, this had jumped to 58 men per thousand.

Para 8.b.(2). Although the 9th ARVN has improved markedly, the performance of the 7th (particularly the 10th Regiment) remains poor, and has resulted in deterioration of the security situation in Kien Hoa Province. This division's performance, however, does seem to have improved under its new commander, Colonel Nam.

Para 8.b.(4). Regional Force improvement throughout most of South Vietnam has been heartening, but the same cannot always be said of the Popular Forces. In some areas the PF have performed with credit and even distinction, but PF must be recruited from the district in which they are to be used and this is a decided weakness in districts with a long history of VC control.

Para 8.c. Although there has been some improvement in the training of RVNAF personnel it is still seriously deficient. Recent information on training indicates that 35 percent of ARVN's battalions received no training in 1969. Another 18 percent received ten days or less. Moreover, US advisors rate more than 50 percent of the training provided to improve combat skills as ineffective.

Para 10.b.(1). The meaning of the statements on the increases in the 1969 budget is unclear. If the sentence means that the GVN had to augment significantly its 1969 defense budget above the level originally planned for 1969, the statement is not accurate. Military expenditures originally planned for 1969 were 85 billion piasters and actual expenditures amounted to 92 billion piasters -- an increase of only eight percent. However, if the sentence

means that defense expenditures in 1969 were above those in 1968 then it is correct, although it should be noted that the increase in 1969 over 1968 (32%) was less than that of 1968 over 1967 (41%).

Para 10.b. (2). The statement on lines 17-10 is incorrect. Data on industrial production for 1969 shows the output of almost all items to be well above that for both 1968 and 1967. Moreover, we have no indication that some factories are closing because of a shortage of workers.

Para 10.c. We do not agree with the comments on the validity of current estimates of the GVN manpower pool. Although a few different methodologies for developing rough estimates have been developed, they have not produced "sophisticated and reliable" estimates. We know of no one in the intelligence community familiar with the subject who has any great confidence in the base population estimate used for South Vietnam. Current aggregates and distributions are used because, even though they are not particularly reliable, they are believed to be the best available.

Page 19, Table 6. We have some difficulty with the available manpower estimates in Table 6, particularly with the number reaching 18 years of age (180,000 to our 100,000). Since we do not know the methodology used or the underlying assumptions employed, we assume they may be understating the population under VC control. Despite the differences in our figures, we agree with the judgment that the country is reaching the limit of available prime manpower.

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